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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of online student services being used by 19 vocational education and training (VET) and higher education institutions in Australia. Information was gathered though site visits between July and September 2000 about online support services for prospective students, enrolling students, enrolled students, and graduating students. A high percentage of participating institutions support all four categories of students with information of varying depth and accessibility. Services provided online include career advice, course information, course advice, information on administrative details, details of the enrollment process, fee-payment options, orientation to online learning, introduction and orientation to specific courses, communication links, administrative services, academic support, personal counseling, career counseling, academic resources (library, databases), information technology support and help lines, career placement, job search skills, resume development, interviewing tips, agency links, grades and transcripts, and teaching, learning, and developmental issues. Many innovative practices were found among the online services provided to students. (Contains 10 references.) (KC)

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Online student services: an overview of the provision

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Online student services - an online initiative within The Framework for National Collaboration in Flexible Learning in VET (2000-2004)

This paper will provide an overview of online student services being used by nineteen VET and higher education institutions. Visits to sites across Australia were undertaken between July and September 2000 as part of the *National Strategy and the Collaborative Framework and Strategy 2000.*

The sites were selected after a web search, using the student support services framework presented in the literature review. This framework included support services provided for students in the following four stages of the learning cycle:

- prospective student
- enrolling student
- enrolled student
- graduating student

The study found a wide range of strategies for student support services being utilised. Some are focusing largely on the teaching/learning aspects, while others are providing a more holistic approach to support services. It should be noted that in the majority of cases the services provided are offered in a variety of modes.

Full presentation

A high percentage of participating institutions covered all dimensions of support within the framework used in this project, from the needs of the prospective student to the needs of the graduate, these varying in depth of information and accessibility.

The prospective learner

In a number of institutions, the prospective learner has access to less information and assistance than students in other stages of the learning cycle. This is especially true in the areas of career and course advice, with access to career advisors being quite difficult. There are limited courses 100% online, with many institutions offering mixed mode. In contrast, course information is extensive, with some sites providing prerequisites and articulation arrangements. A few sites have links to other career sites and career pathways.

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Career advice	The majority of participating institutes have career advice online. This information is also available face-to-face, in hardcopy, over the phone and by email in a number of cases. One provider presents this information in sections for undergraduates, postgraduates and for international students. Another site compiles prospective students' requests for information into a database and sends them information on Career Days etc. Limited sites have their articulation arrangements online also.
	The majority of providers have their Handbook online. *GetAccess* (www.getaccess.wa.go.au) is an online, career-based resource which includes information on: • Self-awareness • Western Australian-specific careers • Labour market • Employment and training information • News – information on the labour market trends, employment and training issues • Careers – career profiles • Career Café – a chat facility • Jobs An interactive career game is also included.
Course information	The majority of sites have their course information online, some with the Prospectus and course summaries. Some include a glossary of terms in their course information, and some also provide this information by way of a 1300 number, email and hardcopy. In a limited number of universities, the specific divisions are responsible for the information that is presented online. Details are also presented for specific courses.
Course advice	The majority of providers have some course advice online. This is also available in hardcopy and face-to-face and in some circumstances is linked to the specific faculty. Career advice is available to students in some institutions, in a range of modes. Limited sites include the prerequisites for the courses.

Information on admin. details (fees, RCC, enrolment or application procedures etc)	Sites have included information on RCCs, Skills Recognition, Advanced Standing and scholarship details, with one institution providing a Credit Precedent List online. Some have fully dynamic forms that change to suit the course. Some institutions have facilities for enrolment and payment online, however, the majority are still striving toward this. Sites have links to information on UAC, the Schools/College Documentation Scheme etc - some with details and availability of admission and admission forms. To a lesser extent, some also have the capability for prospective students to complete forms and send them online.
	The availability of *Change of enrolment* online is quite limited. One provider has a helpdesk to the host provider and the online information called 'Contact Us'.

Enrolling students

Enrolling students have information available on the enrolment process, but the actual facility for e-commerce is very limited, with options being confined to paying over the phone with a credit card, in person and by email or mail.

At the time of the visits there were very few institutions providing complete enrolment online. Many indicated that they were in the process of developing this facility.

Enrolment process	The majority of participants have enrolment information and processes, and enrolment and enquiry forms online. A limited number have the provision of enrolling and re-enrolling online. This information can also be obtained via email, mail, by phone and in person. Faculties have Student Liaison Units to deal with all of these issues. There is limited provision of the facility of a *One-Stop-Shop*, and one provider has an online guide, *Getting Started*.
Payment of fees	There a number of options for paying fees, including Bpay, using a credit card over the phone or paying in person or by mail. The implementation of e-commerce is limited at this period of time, however information on the process of payment of fees is plentiful.

Help with enrolling	Assistance with enrolling is available by email and over the phone, with one specific program with online assistance, *Getting Started,* having the registration, course application and enrolment details. Another provides information on a one-to-one basis, customised to suit the individual. Enrolment in a number of institutions is the responsibility of the specific faculty.

The 'digital divide' has been highlighted as an equity issue that will detract from the learning process for some, with access to the internet still an issue confronting some providers in isolated areas.

Enrolled student

The literature review indicated that the online provider focused on the technological perspective of the mode for the enrolled student. This is consistent with the view of Carroll and McNickle (2000), Collis (1996), Haley (1999) and Nowak (1998), who have commented that online development is content- and technology-driven and narrowly focused on the design and delivery side of education. Whilst the site visits reaffirmed this, there has been a marked shift to a more holistic approach to support services because they are perceived as being essential for effective learning to take place. Pittman (2000, p 12) affirms this view with: 'What is needed is a comprehensive platform for online education, which includes not only presentation and education but also all the administrative functions required for student progress through the institution'. However, it is the administrative functions that appear to be more difficult to put online. These functions include changing courses, financial status, enrolling, payment and the provision of evidence/documentation for recognition of prior learning.

Another area of challenge for online developers is the provision of personal counselling. Even though many providers have this service available face-to-face and over the phone, for the online student requiring this provision beyond the 9.00 am-5.30 pm timeframe, only a limited number of providers have addressed this issue. Restrictions are plentiful, with privacy and communication issues being paramount. Some of these issues are being addressed in the Learnscope project *Online Counselling Skills* and the TAFE Student Services Online project.

Induction and orientation programs are provided in a number of modes. The viability of these different modes is being contested (Brown 1998; Snewin 1999; Webb and Gibson 2000; Williams et al 1997). Despite the different modes being used, it is nevertheless essential for students to be able to access some form of induction and orientation (James 1999; McNickle 1999).

Academic support, IT support and academic resources are provided in varying depths and modes. Examples include IT Liaison Officers in a range of geographical locations, IT mentors (for some courses), an extensive range of teaching and learning support and strategies to aid students in their transition to independent learning, together with resources that can be downloaded instead of using textbooks. The availability of communication links in a variety of modes and access times are acclaimed as one of the more important mechanisms in the support process. It must be noted at this time that even though these facilities are available, the importance of personal contact needs to be acknowledged (Evans and Deschepper 1998; Snewin 1999; Williams et al 1997).

Most inductions to the subjects are discipline- or faculty-specific, although a number of institutions have general orientation material on the website or paper-based material. Distance education institutions appear to have more depth of information in this area.

Communication has been highlighted as one of the more important issues for supporting online students. This was provided in a variety of forms including: email, chat rooms and bulletin boards. Some institutions have personal portals for each student where they can gain information about their own studies.

Personal counselling is an issue for providers, with privacy and authenticity causing concern. Career counselling is provided in some institutions via the phone, email or face-to-face.

Orientation to online learning	There are a range of orientation packages being utilised, including: • The LITE program, which is a self-paced, credit bearing foundation unit entirely online. This unit assists students with library use, location of resources, research skills, using the web, email, word processing and spreadsheets. • The Academic Orientation Program – available in hardcopy or email sent from the specific faculty. • A variety of Welcome packs for online learning. • Orientation sessions held by the teaching and learning areas. • CDs with information specific to online learning. • Information built into the online courses. In a number of examples, orientation is a faculty-specific responsibility and a number of sites have FAQs specific to *Orientation to Online Learning*.

Induction and orientation to specific course	There is a lot of information online on induction/orientation. There is also a range of web-based resources, with a focus on communication. Some providers have this information included in the course notes, which are also sent in hardcopy. In some examples, induction/orientation is a faculty-based responsibility. Examples online include: *Introduction to Online Learning* and *Welcome to Participate in Networks.* Workshops are also available in-house on Learning Strategies, as part of an Induction program.
Communication links (chatrooms, bulletin boards etc) for possible SS use	A variety of communication links are used, including: • Chat sessions • Inbuilt emails specific to courses • Online student lounge • Bulletin boards • Email • Webboard • Helpdesk • Information line • NTU Talkline.
Administrative services (changing courses, results, late fees etc)	The provision of all administrative services online is limited. One provider has this entire service online, another has a *Personal Profile* for students which provides results, timetables, academic history, exam timetable, internet access and the account balance specific to each student. Some providers allow course changes online and viewing of results, and provide helpdesk. Information is also available to students by email, face-to-face, by phone and by mail. One university has Information Systems and Student Administration centrally located to enhance client service and satisfaction.

Academic support (study skills, time management, information literacy, numeracy, peer support)	Academic support is provided in a number of forms, including: • Chat and bulletin boards • Teaching and learning areas, offering study skills and general support • Specific programs including tUNEup, which provides basic academic skills and is available on CD or paper • Academic support available online • Assistance available by email, face-to-face and by phone • An extensive range of study skills available online (most participating organisations) • Tutorial support available online • Peer support (limited) • Extensive Study Skills resources to cover both higher education and TAFE students • *Introduction to University Learning* – a unit students take if they are having trouble at university. The student drops a unit and picks this one up, which helps them with study skills, is a credit-bearing unit and helps the student stay at university • *Learning Online* - a study skills program offered by one of the providers • A video, *From Life to Learning*, which raises awareness of skills, knowledge and abilities that the student brings from school to university
Counselling (personal)	The majority of sites have information on counselling online. This information varies from contact details to more depth, including the different counselling available etc. In limited institutions, counselling is available over the phone and via email, whereas the majority have facilities for face-to-face counselling quite freely available. One institution provides *Regional Liaison Counselling Officers* in regional areas for their students.
Career counselling	Information is available online and over the phone in most cases, with limited email and formal counselling facilities being available.
Academic resources (library, databases, websites, bookshop etc)	Library facilities vary, with online references, catalogues, links and resources being available to the students in most institutions and mostly on the homepage. These services are generally available to students by phone, fax, mail, email, inter-library loan and online. One library provides links with other sites as part of the network – LEARN, whereas another has an electronic reserve for teaching materials for external students.

	One university subscribes to Ebscohost. These articles are available in complete version and can be downloaded from the site instead of using textbooks. One university is running a program – ITPassport - this is in conjunction with the library that gives the students basic computer literacy training and continues throughout the year. This university has a policy that: *All students will leave the University with generic skills, especially IT and Information Literacy skills.* This same university has a two-day turnaround for requests for resources.
IT support and help line	A variety of strategies are used for IT support, including: • *Getting Started,* which is a guide to the internet • *Help Activities for new users,* which looks at issues that new users are likely to encounter • FAQs • 1800 and 1300 phone numbers • Asynchronous discussion • Student Helpdesk • Helpline • Interactive Voice Response • *Kiosk,* which has an extensive range of student information on admissions, enrolment, faculty contacts/information, admission/enrolment status, financial information, units, courses etc • One university provides support 7 days per week, with a 4-hour response time and technical mentors for some courses
Other student services not discussed above that are provided for online students	Services provided by a number of the contributing institutions include: • Childcare • Support for specific needs • Aboriginal Educational Support Service • Access and Equity • International Student Services • English as a Second Language • Financial Assistance • General Support Services, including accommodation, health services, legal assistance, health

Graduating students

The study found that graduating students have been able to access a varied range of assistance and information on career destinations, job seeking skills, agency links and results. Some institutions offer extensive Graduate Destination information, whilst others provide the opportunity for employers to go to the differen. faculties to give employment

details, assistance and even interviews in some cases. Employment information and assistance is also available online.

Information on career destinations	This information is provided in a variety of forms – online, phone and in hard copy. Most institutions have their Handbook online and a variety of information is available online, including links to employment agencies. One university provides employers with a pack. A number of universities have employers come to the university and give presentations about their positions, and employment details. Sometimes, students are interviewed. Graduates will also accompany their employers sometimes and give an account of their experience. Employers put information on the website, including positions and employment information. This is also available by fax and email. Graduate Destination Survey information is available online, with some providers giving very extensive details – categorised into: • Faculties • Courses • By further study • Employment • Age/salary
Job search skills	A number of websites have information online, some having links to employment agencies and links to other appropriate sites. Workshops are also advertised online. This material is sometimes presented as a separate module or included as part of courses.
Resume development	A number of websites have information online, some having links to employment agencies and links to other appropriate sites. Workshops are also advertised online.
Interview tips	This material is sometimes available as a module or as a workshop, which is advertised online. A number of providers have specific information available online, with links to agencies.

Agency links (to industries, career sites, employment sites etc)	Information is accessible online by a number of providers. Many also have links to industry, job agencies (Drake and Dunhill), employment sites, the Australian Jobs Board and other brokers etc. A number of universities have employers come to the university and give presentations of their positions and employment details. Sometimes they interview students.
Results and transcripts	The majority of providers have results available online and to a lesser extent by phone, or in hardcopy. Transcripts are available in hardcopy.

Any other information

Teaching, learning and developmental issues	This section will include some points regarding teaching and learning and online development of resources etc that are not included above.
	
	• Online resources to support learning and aid access to learning
	• The provision of seamless student services to all TAFE students irrespective of delivery mode
	• Students in WebCT - online access to global WebCT support and services
	• A showcase of teaching strategies for online delivery to be made available in October
	• Central TAFE body - hosting the provision and development of online learning
	• Integration of higher education and TAFE, with some teachers/lecturers teaching both sectors – the articulation process being utilised within the one institution from TAFE courses through the higher education sector.
	
	• Presentation of online resources:
	  ○ A series of web pages available on web design
	  ○ Download time - an important consideration for students learning online
	  ○ Short pages - more reader friendly
	  ○ Presentation of voice track and slides available
	  ○ Personalised contact with teachers used extensively in the form of chatrooms and email
	  ○ Careers information - available online within the next 3 weeks, including a virtual careers fair and range of links to sites, from applications to interviews and hotlinks

	• The use of learning strategies to aid learning.
	
	• The main services online students need:
	  o Administration
	  o User name and password
	  o Access on the web with general set up of browser, ISP and access issues
	  o Networks and error messages
	  o How to use chatboards, discussion boards.
	  o Access to IT support and general services
	
	• Students need adequate, up-to-date information and need to be stepped through every process on a basic concrete level
	• Sites need to be easy to navigate
	• So much emphasis has been on the product; now it is time to look at other components in the class room – we need to be proactive
	
	• For online learners to be effective, they need:
	  o Motivation
	  o Research skills
	  o The ability to work with information given to them and to be able to understand and interpret this information effectively
	
	It is important that communication and activities are built into the resources. Communication builds a sense of community and gives the students a sense of ownership of that channel
	
	Students having difficulties are usually identified within five weeks by their tutors.
	
	Much of the online courses around the world are for postgraduate students who have independent learning skills
	
	www.bobby.com - a site that evaluates the accessibility of other sites.

Innovative practices:

Other examples of innovative practice to aid the online learner include:

- One provider presents career advice in sections for undergraduates, postgraduates and for international students.
- The LITE program, which is a self-paced, credit bearing foundation unit that is entirely online. This unit assists students with library use, location of resources, research skills, using the web, email, word processing and spreadsheets

- Graduate Destination Survey information is available online, with extensive details being categorised into:
    - Faculties
    - Courses
    - By further study
    - Employment
    - Age Salary.

Personnel associated with all sites included in this study made it quite clear that they are still grappling with many facets of the transition to online delivery and the provision of support services in this innovative environment. However, their willingness to share their experiences has made the study more viable and worthwhile.

Provider approaches tend to be quite individualistic, often reflecting the needs of their particular client groups. But they all have something to offer as an example of innovative practice to their educational counterparts. Both sectors in the study - VET and higher education - recognise that a holistic approach is essential in the provision of support services.

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